

Changing Dynamics of the Silk Route

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Abstract-The Silk Route was a historic trade route that dated from the second century B.C.E to the fifteenth century C.E. It was a network of Eurasian trade routes that stretched from Asia to the Mediterranean. The silk route was established by Zhang Qian a Chinese official and diplomat of the Han dynasty of China. It was a means to exchange various goods, cultures, science, arts, technology, and religion in various regions. Among the goods Chinese silk was the most demanded and lucrative good to be traded and thus the network of trade routes was named the Silk Route. In the fifteenth century with the fragmentation of the Mongol empire, the unity of the ancient silk route loosened and gradually declined. In 2013, after six centuries of the decline of the ancient silk route China announced an initiative to revive the silk route, connecting more than sixty countries from Asia, Europe, and Africa. It aims to establish a connection and cooperation between countries around the world like the ancient and medieval times. This paper tries to re-examine the old silk route and tries to understand the economic impact of the new silk route. The new silk route has lots of potential and may lead to a flourishing trade and economy. However, it has many obstacles in its way as it's a huge project spanning over the continents.

Keywords: ancient silk route, new silk route, economy.

INTRODUCTION

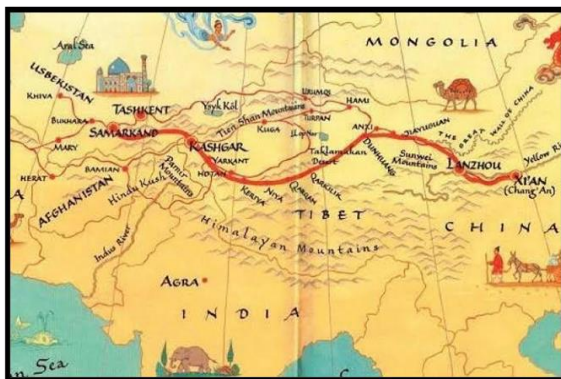


Fig1. Ancient Silk Route

Source: www.Indianexpress.com

1. Roots of the silk route

Back in the 4th century BCE Alexander the Great with his conquests and expeditions left Greek ideas and his people in the east. After his death turbulence occurred however new kingdoms were established by his followers. One such follower was Seleucus. After Alexander's death, the land between the river Tigris and Indus came under his control. He established his dynasty and ruled for nearly three centuries. In these centuries the eastern and western cultures mingled together and took a new birth. The Ancient Greek influence was visible in the art and culture of Central Asia. This was the stepping stone in linking the Western and Eastern worlds.

In the second century BCE. China was successfully expanding its territory under the Han dynasty and opened the gateways of the trade routes toward the West. Chinese had a well-regulated formal framework for trading. A collection of 35,000 texts from the garrison town of Xuanquan¹ shows regulations and rules for the merchants from the outside territory. The merchants had to stick to designated routes. Officials were appointed to keep track of the number of foreign merchants, information about their homeland, how much they spent on their food, and their titles and status in their homeland. Trade between China and the world gradually developed. It was not easy for the merchants to travel across China to trade because of the soaring mountains and burning Gobi Desert on its way. The temperature used to be so high that the regions were almost isolated without any settlements. Thus, it was highly risky to take valuable goods through such a harsh area. These regions were also not safe because of the dacoits and robbers.

The Han dynasty of China highly encouraged foreign trade to boost their economy. The Han Emperor spread the silk route by exploring, conquests, and alliances. In 130 BCE embassies of the Han Dynasty were sent

¹ Peter Frankopan, The Silk Road: A New History of the World, (2015) Pg-31.

to many Central Asian kingdoms for alliances. Zhang Qian an Ambassador of the Han dynasty went to obtain an alliance with Yuezhi, the kingdom of Dayuan in Ferghana, the Bactrian country of Daxia, and Kangju of central Asia².

In Europe, the Roman Empire also rose to power and expanded its borders further towards the east. It bloomed an interest in the land that lie further east in the mind of the Romans. Rome was already aware of the luxurious and fine lifestyle of the frontiers in the east. Emperor Augustus in the 1st BCE sends merchants to establish trade links with eastern kingdoms. Indian Tamil text also records the arrival of Roman traders, their good ships,³ and the trade goods. The trade links were now evolving between Rome and China along with the intermediary regions that lie between them. Various goods were exchanged. The Roman citizens indulged in exotic goods from the East. Chief among the goods that used to be traded was the silk. Silk was first discovered in China and soon became a luxury cloth in the world. Silk art was confined to China till the third century B.C.E. and thus China held a virtual monopoly of silk art and textiles. The appearance of Chinese silk in Rome and its increasing popularity led to an outburst of trade between Rome and the East.

1.1 Trade and Market

Silk was the most lucrative good that travelled via the silk route to various regions of China. Silk was treated not only as a luxury cloth but also used to pay troops and courts along with the coins. In the Han Dynasty bolts of raw silk were often used as a currency. Soon Silk became an international means of exchange in world trade. Beside Silk ceramics, cotton, paper, gunpowder, tea, Chinese textiles and exotic goods like porcelain, ivory, and jade also reached the western markets and households. Spices, sandalwood, and brassware from the Indian sub-continent were sold throughout the silk route. Lapis lazuli from the north western Indian region (modern-day Afghanistan) was another semi-precious stone that was in demand. Dates, woollen rugs, horses, and camels were traded from the central Asian region of Persia. Rome on the other hand used to trade with bullion or in exchange for Olives, glassware, wine, figs, grapes, and walnuts.

² Zhang Yiping, Story of the Silk Road, (2005) Pg-22

Various markets were developed around the meeting points of these silk routes. They were often commissioned and maintained by the ruling class to encourage trade and prosperity in their homeland. The rulers and emperors personally made arrangements to ensure the safety of the merchants from robbers and dacoits. Rest homes were developed in various regions for the merchants as hospitality towards them.

Dunhuang in China was an important town in China that developed after the silk route as it was the meeting point of the northern and southern branches of the silk route. Chinese merchants used to travel from Chang'an the capital of China with their goods to Dunhuang to conduct trade. It also flows another way around the foreign goods used to reach Dunhuang and from there used to be supplied to the capital and other parts of China.

In the 13th and 14th century CE Delhi became the centre of the exchange between China and India. Bharuch, a port city also developed as the centre of economy in India as goods and merchants from Rome used to come here for trade.

Capitals like Baghdad and Constantinople became more bustling with markets and economies as the silk route and its trade swelled. Towns like Venice and Alexandria became the major centres of global commerce. Cairo, and Bukhara also developed into global Markets.

1.2 Exchange of Ideas

Silk Route was not only in charge of the transmission of trade goods but also transmitted ideas, art, sciences, faiths, and religion. The silk route was crowded with deities, cults, priests, and local rulers and their intellectual and theological ideas. Local cults and belief systems met, borrowed from each other, and refined their ideas which resulted in the reassimilation of cultures.

Artistic cultures like the art of porcelain and the art of printing with the help of a wood block on cloth which was born in China also transmit through the Silk Route. Hellenistic style of art and culture also reached Asia. Art forms and styles merged to take a new style. Gandhara art of western Asia (present-day Afghanistan) which developed under Kushan is the best example of the assimilation of art. Gandhara art

³ Ibid, Peter Frankopan (2015) Pg. -35

was an art form whose theme revolves around Buddhism and Hinduism but the art style is more Hellenistic than indigenous art style. It played an important role in Buddhism because it was the first time that Buddha was depicted in human form.

The silk route became the meeting point between Iranian Religions and another ancient faith, Judaism⁴. In 586 BCE Judah was captured by Babylonians and Jewish were exiled. They left their land created settlements along the way of the Silk Route and carry their culture and ideas with them on their path.

In the 2nd century BCE Buddhism spread in China and with the increasing popularity of the Silk Route Buddhism also travelled towards central Asia. Inscriptions of the 2nd – 3rd centuries from China shows the spreading of Buddhism principles in central Asia and Europe. A sect known as Therapeutai ⁵which flourished in Alexandria in Egypt has similarities to Buddhism.

Along with Buddhism Christianity also flowed along the silk route toward the East. On its way, Christianity was often challenged by the old and local traditions of the regions. Even though Christianity 's root is considered to be Rome in Europe however its origin is in Central Asia in Jerusalem the birthplace of Christ. In 1099 crusaders captured the Jerusalem. Sogdians in central Asia became the transmitters of Christianity from West to East. In the 7th to the 11th centuries, three major mass conversions of Turks to Christianity took place. Christianity also gained acknowledgment from the Chinese.

By 670 CE the Arab armies won the land to the river Oxus. The silk route from the Mediterranean to the Pamirs now was under the control of Arabs. Gradually Islam principles were promoted and previously Christians and Zoroastrians began converting to Islam. Islam soon became the dominant religion in the region.

1.3 The Decline of the Ancient silk route

The stability of the silk route shook right after the fall of the Roman empire and the Han Dynasty in China. The support and stability that encourage trade and brought prosperity get threatened. Natural calamities like Black Death and internal turmoil in the Han dynasty broke it into pieces kingdoms. Official records of the Han Dynasty record the name of a general called

Ban Chao who dislodged the silk route by disrupting the Chinese power. The Roman Empire too collapses with extravagant expenditure on the court, armies, and wars which drained the economy of the empire. In addition to these were internal revolts and invasions of barbaric tribes like Visigoths and German tribes. The trade further declined due to religious wars and hostiles. In the 11th century trade between Europe and Central Asia stopped completely due to crusades and religious turmoil among Christians, Jewish, and Muslims. Mongols got expelled from China and settled further in central Asia. Under the Mongols, the silk route stabilized for a short period however with its decline silk route in central Asia also collapsed losing its harmony and local traders took it into their hands. In the fourteenth century, a plague called Black Death spread in Europe. The first record of the Black Death was found in Kul of Central Asia. It killed almost sixty percent of Europe's population. The Silk Route and the trading ships were responsible for transmitting the plague. The incident impacted the world economy and hostile opinions about the Silk Route.

By the fifteenth century, a new wave of Renaissance emerged in Europe. It led to the development of science, technology, and knowledge. With the discovery of a new world, a new zeal to find new lands developed in the Europeans and they understood that the earth is round. They went to discover new paths towards the east by going further towards the west. Now Europeans didn't need any middlemen from central Asia and the long route of silk routes.

2. The new initiative

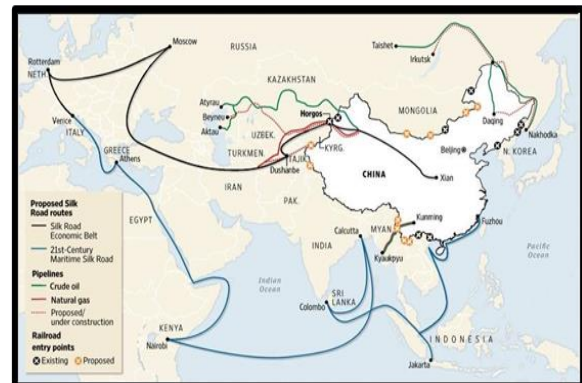


Fig 2.Xinhua (Silk Road routes)

Source : assets.weforum.org

⁴ Maria Jose de Freitas, The Silk Road: A Sustainable Culture Route, Pg-37

⁵ Ibid, Peter Frankopan (2015) Pg- 46

In 2013, China began to officially restore the historic Silk Route under Chinese President Xi Jinping. The economic value of the initiative is estimated to be \$9 Billion. About sixty countries from around the world are part of the initiative. The new silk road project is named One Belt One Road (OBOR). Under this project, two economic corridors are being constructed. One is the inland route and the other is a maritime channel. These corridors are combinations of roads, highways, railways, ports, and other infrastructural and energy plans. The New Silk Route aims to bring economic prosperity and smooth international trade. It claims to provide guidance and infrastructural development to backward countries by giving them funds and assistance. The Chinese government has successfully signed contracts with many countries for the Silk Route. Many projects of the Silk Route have already been started. It is assumed by economists around the world that after competition of the Silk Route, it will lead to profit accumulation by boosting international trade.

2.1 Connectivity

The new silk route project contains two connected routes. One is via land called Silk Road Economic Belt (S.R.E.B) and the other one was maritime known as Maritime Silk Road (M.S.R).

The land route contains five corridors.

North Line A: North America - North Pacific - Japan – South Korea – zarubino – huichun – yanji – jilin-Changchun- North Line B, Middle Line, South Line, and Central Line. These corridors cover sixty-four countries.

North Line B: Beijing – Russia – Germany – Northern Europe

Middle Line: Beijing – Zheng Chun – Xi’an – Urumqi – Afghanistan – Kazakhstan – Hungary – Paris.

South Line: Quanzhou – Fuzhou – Guangzhou – Huizhou – Beihai – Kuala Lumpur – Jakarta – Colombo – Calcutta – Nairobi – Athens – Venice.

Central Line : Lianyungang – Zhengzhou- Xi’an – Lanzhou – Xinjiang - Central Asia – Europe.⁶

2.2 Impact of the New silk route

⁶ One Belt One Road Initiative, <https://topchinatravel.com/silk-road/one-belt-one-road.htm>

The new silk route promises many developments to the countries participating in it.

China: China’s main goal behind the new silk route was to make a global image, to secure China’s energy supply through links with Central Asia. It also aims to achieve markets for its goods and self-sufficiency in its economy.

Kenya: in May 2014, China and Kenya signs a cooperation for the new One Belt and One Road. In Kenya, a new railway will be built in the past 100 years for connecting the new silk route.

Pakistan: China signed a contract with Pakistan on 22 December 2015 to build the Karachi-Lahore Highway. The project is the largest infrastructure for China-Pakistan corridor. The Chinese government also promised to invest at least \$35 Billion in Pakistan by 2030 to finance the construction of power plants.

Indonesia: in Indonesia, a high-speed rail will connect Djakarta to Bandung. The railway will be equipped with China’s technology.

Iran: In Iran, a high-speed rail project called Tehran-Mashhad High-Speed Rail Project has been opened on 6 February 2016. It was attended by the Iranian President.

Bangladesh: Sheila GanJie Power in Bangladesh is initiated in Bangladesh and this will alleviate the shortage of electricity in Bangladesh.

2.3 Economic impact

Since the 1960s, international trade patterns were studied based on the gravity model⁷. The model was based on the principle of the law of universal gravity that attraction between planetary bodies is determined by their masses and the distance lying between them. The gravity model stresses that the trade volumes are based on the economic size and the distance between the trading partners. here, the size is measured in Gross Domestic Price (GDP) and the distance in geographical terms. According to empirical studies, majority of the world trade takes place between partners less than 3000km. transport and connectivity played a major role in the trade.

Based on this model, it is believed that one belt and one road will bring an economic boost by connecting major economic centres and ports. Economists around

⁷ S. Baniya, N. Rocha and M. Ruta, Trade effects of the New Silk Road: A Gravity Analysis, (2019). Pg-3

the world are expecting growth in the overall GDP of the countries. The growing infrastructure will also bring prosperity and urbanization in the backward areas. Infrastructural improvements and intercountry roads will lower transportation and shipping costs which will increase the flow of goods and boost the international economy.

2.4 Impediments

The new silk route promises great achievements and economic outbursts and infrastructure development in the long run. However, it has many hurdles in its way because it's an intercontinental and huge project.

The environment is the first and major issue in this project. The huge construction project of the one belt road will harm the natural environment and may lead to the huge rehabilitation of people. This may harm the substantiality of the people.

The new silk route also threatens the security of the countries. Every country along with the new silk route faces a unique combination of risks and challenges. Many countries are objecting to the project. political tensions and rivalry are also a challenge.

Lastly, natural calamities like Coronavirus Pandemic were almost a replica of the Black Death. The pandemic of 2019-2020 injured many economies of various countries resulting in a shortage of funds.

CONCLUSION

The ancient silk route was a way of modern-day globalization. It was not only a trade route but a link that attached various cultures, religions, and societies. The ancient silk route contributes to the development of modern society, technology, sciences, and beliefs. The new silk route also aims for an economic boost and development. It may lead to the second globalization even though it has challenges on its way, there are solutions as well. It's a going project with lots of potential. The revival of the Silk route has again brought the promise of economic boost and international commerce and markets. It also secures new advancements in technology and infrastructure. However, it also has many obstacles in its way. It's a huge project and a question arises on its success in comparison to the ancient silk route.

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